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ALTERATION TO EXALTATION IN EURIPIDES' MEDEA

Jennifer Blakeslee

The presence of an antecedent within a work can become all the more powerful through transformation and deft incorporation as opposed to mere replication. The strength of such alteration is realized in one of Euripides' earliest tragedies. The statement brought forth from his tale of an unrelenting woman scorned depends on the manner in which he alters the existing Greek tragic tradition and subsequently incorporates Homeric imagery to Medea's advantage.

There are many relatively constant elements in Greek tragedy, and Euripides began writing his works in the midst of these strong traditions. These characteristics were largely due to the physical limitations of the stage itself, the theatrical materials available for the author's utilization, and the fact that the tragic composers were merely retelling legends for demanding, yet conservative, audiences. Conformity to these guidelines could lead to the success of a tragedian, and possibly Euripides' late-found recognition is attributable to his deviance from the strict form.

Euripides' modifications of form lie largely in the written word, not in the extrapolation of the stage's physical confines, beginning with his unusual version of a prologue speech. The prologue speech serves to present the story

chronologically up to the point when the author accepts the responsibility of telling the story. These monologues are usually delivered by a major character, such as Oedipus himself in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Euripides transforms this tradition by giving the prologue speech to a character who is not only female, but also in the low position of nurse. The nurse is allowed to speak in an epic tone not suited to her social standing and she dares to pass moral judgment both for Medea, hinting at the events which will ensue, and against the character of Jason. This nurse's emotional speech, strewn with opinions on subjects a nurse shouldn't speak of, is Euripides' turn on the prologue tradition.

The Medea also includes passionate debates between major characters, a dramatic focal point in the Greek tragedies. These debates usually pit hero and adversary and, in the traditional tragedies as well as in the epic poems and Plato's dialogues, the hero is often in search of civic justice. Euripides' exception to this rule is that Medea is a woman, a woman who is acting in passion with selfish disregard for reason, relishing in a cyclical justice through revenge. Other than Medea's femininity, her debate with Creon is true to tradition. There is an interesting echo of Sophocles at this point, in that Oedipus falls to his knees begging Creon to banish him from the kingdom for the good of others, whereas Medea appeals to Euripides' Creon for the freedom to stay one more day in Corinth for the good of herself. Another debate in *The Medea*, between the spiteful woman and Jason, the target for her hate, relies on Medea's gender and her murderous goals for the break from tradition. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* serves as a specific precursor when considering Medea's second conversation with Jason, where she brings forth a contrived reconciliation. Medea uses a veritable negation of her earlier speech exploring the plight of woman (231-266) to lure Jason into her clever trap, much as Clytemnestra falsely but hospitably welcomes Agamemnon.

Another constant element in Greek tragedy lies within *The Medea*, that of the messenger's speech bringing news of ambush and tragic happenings. Euripides' turn on this characteristic is in the confrontational scene between Medea and the messenger. She is pleased to see one of Jason's servants arriving, sure of what tidings he bears, but the messenger, though he warns Medea to flee from Corinth, expresses his outrage at the crimes she has so boldly committed. This is uncommon, as the messenger is usually neutral, merely saddened by tragic events.

It was not infrequent for tragic dramatists of Euripides' age to make reference to Homer, or to write in the style and tone of the epic poets. It is the way that Euripides uses the epic traditions to glorify Medea that makes them a significant antecedent, more than expected components of the tragedy. The author allows Medea to deify herself through passionate acts and inhuman plotting. This "inhuman" or "super-human" quality was a characteristic of the epic heroes. Euripides uses the traditional epic references to man (or woman, in his configuration) striving to be remembered.

*Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited,
A stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite,
One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends;
For the lives of such persons are most remembered.*

These lines (*The Medea*, 807-810) not only define a life goal of the epic heroes, they also incorporate the Socratic definition of power from *The Republic*. Euripides also allows Medea to portray herself as an epic hero, strong and relentless in her convictions and courage, though her purposes cross into unprecedented territory. He creates a goddess, and she refers to herself in alignment with the gods when lamenting her decisions: "Oh, I am forced to weep, old man. The gods and I, I in a kind of madness, have contrived all this" (*The Medea*, 1013-1014). Medea, in the conclusion of the tragedy, leaves

Jason, departing in a dragon-drawn chariot bearing her sacrificed sons. Here, Euripides allows Medea the ultimate self-deification.

Aside from the particulars of the tradition, Euripides makes a very significant break from normality. Medea is a woman whose actions affect the entire city of Corinth. It is within the tradition for a character to have this effect on a city, including Sophocles' Oedipus as well as Homer's Helen of Troy. Euripides assigns Medea many characteristics that set her apart from her predecessors. First, there is the simple fact that she is a woman, a woman of cleverness and endurance. Secondly, though she is a notable woman of her time, her situation is entirely normal. Euripides recognized this state of conditions allowed a woman of his day, conditions of eternal silence and powerlessness. Medea is granted by the author a generous discourse on the despicable position of the Corinthian woman, the speech which she deftly alters in her feigned submission to Jason. Euripides allows Medea to justify her actions, with reference to the Socratic problem of passion versus reason. She explains that her passion simply overcame her reason, saying "But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury" (1079). Another daring aspect of her character is revealed as Euripides makes clear throughout the fact that Medea is acting out of total selfishness, an evil within both the epic and the Greek tragic traditions. Returning to the effects that Corinth suffers at Medea's hand, it is important to note that she gives considerable forethought to her actions, entirely aware of their consequences. This is not true of either Helen of Troy or Oedipus, two characters relatively blind to what future their actions might bring. Euripides, both with Medea's speeches and her justifications, explores an aspect of womanhood not touched on before. Euripides awards Medea the ability to make a mockery of the innocent princess, the compromising Creon, the ignorant Jason, the generous Aegeus, and the doubting chorus who refuses to believe that she will do what

they fear most. Euripides uses these many characteristics of one woman to comment against both the restrictions of the Greek tragic and epic norms and the ignorance of women upheld in these traditions.

Euripides is making a statement with the tragedy *The Medea* and the strength of this statement lies in the realm of transformation. He gives birth to a woman who encompasses the combined forces of epic goddess and Greek tragic heroine. The introspection of minor characters, the unheard of solidarity of a silent sex, and the glorification of one woman who in her ruthless selfishness manages to justify her actions and make a mockery of the men who try to hinder as well as help her are new challenges to a strict dramatic code. Euripides contrives to turn innocent children into justifiable losses and a love-struck girl into a traitor to femininity. Medea arises a fiery victor and her words may be Euripides' as well when she answers the chorus who begs her not to take such new and drastic steps away from that which is expected of her: "I can do no other thing. It is understandable for you to speak thus. You have not suffered as I have" (813-15). Euripides and Medea saw the frailty of tradition as compared to the exaltation of individual experience.

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